

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS' HOLISTIC APPROACH TO WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

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**Abstract:** *Today's modern school, globalization and the development of technology, bring great challenges, not only for teachers, but for the whole society. Problems in children's behavior are a serious social and psychological problem. People who follow children's development and want them to change are those who are constantly improving, applying the key concepts of holistic education, until they see the change.*

*The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of a holistic approach, in which the teacher is not only an educator but also a companion and a facilitator, one that helps and facilitates the learning process (Farbes, 1996). It is important that we monitor the child's development from all aspects. Encouraging children for positive development and creativity, seeing them as decision makers in their environment, are just some of the elements of applying holism.*

**Key words:** *undesirable behaviors; holistic approach; prevention of behavior;*

## ZNAČAJ HOLISTIČKOG PRISTUPA UČITELJA U RADU SA DECOM SA PROBLEMIMA U PONAŠANJU

**Abstract:** *Današnja savremena škola, globalizacija i razvoj tehnologije, nose velike izazove, ne samo za učitelje, već i za čitavo društvo. Problemi u ponašanju dece predstavljaju ozbiljan socijalni i psihološki problem. Osoba koja prati razvoj dece i želi njihovu promenu je osoba koja se konstantno usavršava, primenjuje ključne koncepte holističke edukacije, sve dok ne vidi promenu.*

*Namera ovog rada je da ukaže na značaj holističkog pristupa, u kome je nastavnik ne samo edukator već drug i fasilikator, onaj koji pomaže i olakšva proces učenja (Farbes, 1996). Važno je pratiti razvoj deteta sa svih aspekata. Podsticati decu na pozitivan razvoj i kreativnost, posmatrati ih kao donosioce odluka u svom okruženju, samo su neki od elemenata primene holizma.*

**Key words:** *nepoželjna ponašanja; holistički pristup; prevencija ponašanja;*

## **Introduction**

One of the current problems today is children who exhibit problematic behavior. There is a growing number of researchers that have been addressing this issue. Governments and schools are taking the necessary precautionary and intervention measures.

The teacher, together with parents, monitors the growth and development of students. Statistics show us that more and more children and young people exhibit problematic behavior. From the age of 3 to 5, the problems that children exhibit, even aggression, are often invisible to the parents, ascribing them to the child's hyperactive phase. However, behavioral problems begin to become visible and escalate in elementary school age. Behind problematic behavior is always the repressed emotion, anger, fury, sadness that the teacher or parent must listen to and recognize. Other forms of inappropriate behavior such as fights, disinterest in attending, irregular attendance, skipping school, or consuming psychoactive substances are all a call for response.

“If violence is part of the child's everyday life at school, the child will adopt violence as a way of life and values related to violence as personal values” (Popadić, Plut and Pavlović, 2014, p.24).

The teacher does not have a magical solution, but he/she is the person who has the power to create a positive climate in his/her class. Working with children and young people promotes the unconditional and full respect for the fundamental rights and interests of children as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>28</sup>. Acceptance and understanding opens the door to change; by taking care of the lasting interest of children, we are taking the initiative to change behavior and therefore their future (Stevanović & Marković, 2014).

By applying the holistic approach, the teacher directs the children to get to know themselves, their potentials, take responsibility for themselves and their environment. Looking at the child as a whole, the teacher cultivates the spirituality and values of each child.

Miller (2005) states that the rise of holistic education in the last 25 years has been positive and that an increasing number of people in many parts of the world are embracing this worldview. An increasing number of Waldorf and Montessori schools show that parents and teachers are interested in this type of education, “that is, teaching and learning methods that are in line with the natural rhythms of human development” (Miller, 2005, p.5).

## **Terminological definition**

The law on juvenile offenders and the job description of institutions dealing with children use the formulations - juveniles with behavioral problems and juveniles in conflict with the law. Our law identifies a child under 14 and a minor under 18 (Stevanović, 2013) so the children with behavioral problems are 0-14 years old, and juveniles with behavioral problems and in conflict with the law are 0-

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<sup>28</sup>Convention on the Rights of the Child, november 1989, Geneva

18 years old. Only corrective measures can be imposed on children under 14 when it comes to the implementation of the Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders<sup>29</sup>.

According to the International Classification of Diseases ICD-10 (WHO, 1992) or DSM-V (APA, 2013), behavioral disorders are characterized by the persistent and pervasive presence of patterns of antisocial, aggressive and challenging behavior (ICD-10: *Classification of mental and behavioral disorders: clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines*, WHO, 1992).<sup>30</sup>

“The definition of behavioral disorder implies all behavioral phenomena, biological, psychological and social genesis that go beyond generally accepted norms of behavior” (Stevanović, 2013, p.7).

The group of authors (V. Kovacević, T. Dobrenović, V. Podlugar) emphasize in their research that behavioral disorders represent behaviors that are "significantly different from the usual behavior of the majority" (Uzelac, 1995, p.36).

Stevanović (2013) states that the term “children with behavioral problems” is used by practitioners as the most comprehensive, and it can include children who violate legal norms and those whose behavior is not punishable by law but is defined as antisocial, as well as abuse of psychoactive substances, runaways (p.3). The term “antisocial behavior”, synonymous with unwanted behavior, is behavior that is contrary to social and moral norms (Šaljić, 2014, p.7).

Ilić (2000) states that three stages of social behavior disorders are most often mentioned: the first stage is characterized by frustration, disobeying orders and rules, the need for emotional dependence, the occurrence of negative reaction towards parents, opposing authority, skipping classes, intolerance towards friends and the like. There may also be a lack of concentration, attention, anything that causes inappropriate behavior. The second stage usually consists of negative reaction towards parents, which then gets transferred to school, to teachers, there is then disobedience to authority, tendencies to meet needs outside the parental home, first offenses, thefts, tendency to take alcohol and other psychoactive substances, and so on. In the third stage, we can see that aggressive habits in various groups and interactions, the destruction of objects and the tendency to commit crimes have already been substantially formed (p.80).

### **Previous studies**

Research in Serbia indicates that caring for children remains primarily the mother's responsibility (Mihić, Zotović and Petrović, 2006). According to a survey by the Center for Social Work (CSW), in 2017, a total of 19,829 juveniles with behavioral problems and juveniles in conflict with the law were recorded, of which

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<sup>29</sup>Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles.

<sup>30</sup>The international Classification of Diseases-ICD, WHO, <https://icd.who.int/browse10/2016/en>  
Here translate das MCD: medical classification of diseases by the World Health Organization. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, APA-American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Society.

16,412 were juveniles over 14 with criminal liability, and 3,417 were children under 14 without criminal liability. Of that number, in 2017, a total of 1,270 children under the age of 14 committed a crime. In terms of gender, boys dominate with 82%. Parents in Serbia apply physical punishment in 25% of cases in young children (1-2 years), while this type of disciplining is used much less often in older age (10-14 years), namely, in 8% of cases<sup>31</sup> (*Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2017*).

Chart 1. The number of children under 14 who are criminals works in the period 2013-2017. (*chart taken from the survey Children in the Social Welfare System, Republic Institute for Social Welfare, Serbia, 2017*)

We can see in the chart that the number of children who committed crimes in the period 2013 -2017. increased on an annual basis, in 2013 there were 791 children, while in 2017. there were 1270 children. The most common obstacles faced by parents of children experiencing behavioral problems are poverty<sup>32</sup>, unemployment or low-level employment that is incompatible with educational degree, family disintegration, moral decay, inadequate use of free time and inefficient education systems. According to the Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia (MODS, 2017), one third of children are at risk of poverty as one of the factors contributing to the problem.

Psychology and other humanities recognize children at risk as a vulnerable group of children. In most cases, these are children from socially marginalized groups, children from disadvantaged socio-economic families, children with disabilities, children without parental care, and children from single-parent families.

Lower socioeconomic status of families is associated with lower maternal affection in the educational approach to children, as well as with more present parental conflicts (Zotović, 2007). A major meta-analysis looked at family factors that correlated with behavioral problems and identified four major contributing groups: 1. Neglect (parents spend insufficient time with their children, especially fathers); 2. Presence of conflict (the presence of conflict, between parents and children, as well as between children and between parents); 3. Violent or criminogenic parental-educational figures; 4. Instability and sudden unwanted changes (domestic violence, marital strife, divorce, illness and death (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986, according to: Radojević, 2015, p.6).

When it comes to research focused on the study of parenting disciplines, they are mainly focused on physical punishment (Najdanović-Tomović, 1996; Ćorović, 2012, according to: Isaković, 2017, p.230) and encouraging legal prohibition of this

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<sup>31</sup>Republic Institute for Social Protection <http://www.zavodsz.gov.rs/media/1233/deca-u-sistemu-socijalne-zastite-u-2017.pdf> accessed on June 2019.

<sup>32</sup>According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) children are most exposed to the risk of poverty (30,0%).

form of parenting by parents (Ljubojev, 2004; Stevanović and Srna, 2010, according to: Isaković, 2017, p.230).

According to UNICEF (2017), 44% of boys and 42% of girls under the age of 14 have suffered physical punishment at home. Most children, 65%, report the violence to their parents first, statistics further show that a relatively small but worrying percentage, 14 to 17% of children, do not discuss their experiences when it comes to violence (Harris et al., 2002; Naylor, Cowie, & DelRey, 2001: according to Gross, 2002).

All consequences of violence equally affect children and their mental and physical development.

### **Most common risk factors**

The behavior of the child is the result of individual and social factors. Individual characteristics of the child, parental style of upbringing, family conditions and school environment all have a dominant influence on the development of problematic behavior in children.

Significant factors on which an individual's development depends are:

*Personality structure* - development depends on the activity of the individual, so we could say that the development of psychological life and the degree of development of psychological functions and traits depend on: the heritage, the environment and the activity of the individual. The American psychologist Watson used to say, "Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors" (Rot, 1969, p.65).

*Family influence* - the family is a key factor in child development. The role of the family is very important in the first years of each child's life. Parenting styles are of primary importance. The type of family a child will grow up in will certainly influence his or her development. Longitudinal studies have shown that inadequate parental supervision, lack of attention and discipline based on physical punishment result in abusive behavior by children (Farrington, Justicia et. al., 2006: according to Šaljić, p.2014).

We have witnessed that some studies indicate that children without parental care who came to permanent care after 6 months of age exhibited increased levels of anxiety, behavioral problems, insecurity. Most research shows that if a child has not formed an adequate attachment to his/her foster parents within 12 months, the risk of difficulty in socialization increases (Howe, 1998). Family influence, degree of parental involvement, supervision of the child, the way the child handles conflicts and very often inconsistent or harsh disciplining are the most common risk factors (Patterson et al. 1989).

*School influence* - the school systematically extends and develops the process of intellectual, emotional and social development started in the family. Starting

school is about coming to a new environment, with newer requirements and relationships compared to those the child had in the family. Rot (1969) states that, in addition to the curriculum, the organization of school life and the teachers' personalities have a significant influence on the development of certain personality traits. The teacher and the parent are role models for the child and their relationships and actions are of great importance for the child's growth.

*Impact of peer environment* - social environment is of great importance for the development of psychic life. Some environments encourage their development more than others. It often seems that an environment that is the same for different individuals, say, two children, even though they are children of the same parents and live in the same family, does not imply that they have the same environment. Parents' relationships may vary (Rot, 1969, p.69). Same with the peer environment, the relationship between peers can be positive and negative, which significantly affects children's behavior in the environment. Behavioral causes may lie in beliefs and attitudes (Wasserman et al. 2003). They are formed in childhood, but especially escalate in a peer environment. When it comes to beliefs, they form prejudices and stereotypes, thus causing problems in communication and inappropriate behavior among children.

*Impact of socio-economic factors* - despite the numerous theories about the emergence of behavioral problems, the prevailing view today is that destructiveness and antisocial behaviors come from the primary learned behavior, observational learning, imitation, try-out and repetition (Bandura, Barou, Montagu, Huesmann).

*Mass media* - media as a form of mass communication can have both positive sides and negative effects, depending on the programs that are presented to the children. The media has become an integral and inevitable part of the educational process. "People's connection or dependence on the media has also produced some psychopathological phenomena, such as the growing dependence of young people on the media, spending too much time on the computer, video games, television, and the like" (Suzić, 2005, p.60).

### **The role of the school in the prevention of problematic behavior of children**

Today's modern school faces some great social challenges. The development of technology and digitization in a globalized society comes with it more complex requirements. School is a social institution whose activity is not only to educate students, but also to prepare them to apply and incorporate the knowledge they have acquired. School plays a major role when it comes to preventing problematic behavior. The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, as well as the General and Special Protocols adopted within each school, oblige us to prevent and intervene and to put a stop to problematic behavior of children (Bašić, 2009).

Preventive measures and activities also include thematic prevention programs, prevention of the development of phenomena such as violence, drug addiction, aggression, etc. They are aimed at improving students' knowledge and awareness of various forms of behavioral disorders (Žunić-Pavlović et al., 2010).

Important subjects for the realization of educational work are teachers, as a key factor on which the quality of education depends. Therefore, constant teacher development<sup>33</sup>, counseling and support by professional associates in the school, i.e. psychologists and pedagogists, are needed.

Teachers' professional competences are combinations of knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as attitudes and values that a teacher can use in the course of his / her professional activities (Gonzales & Wagenaar, 2008).

### **Holistic education**

*Holism* (from ὅλος/holos, a Greek word meaning all, entire, total) implies holistic education based on theories of holism. The holistic education movement started with the emergence of alternative pedagogies, characteristic of the early 20th century. There are many philosophical and practical derivatives of the holistic learning theory, however, one unifying principle is that everything in the world (or in the universe) is interconnected (Clark, 1991. according to Johnson, 2006). The key concepts of holistic education are: connectedness, wholeness and existence.

By applying the holistic approach, the teacher develops intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual development in children. Children develop holistically, which means they need support in terms of “health, nutrition, care, protection, early stimulation and learning” (Tran, 2013, p.2). Maria Montessori stated: “Follow the child!” Following the child is the real beginning of a holistic education (Montessori 1963, p.69-70).

Swiss humanitarian Johann Pestalozzi, American Transcendentalists Thoreau, Emerson and Alcott, founders of progressive education - Francis Parker and John Dewey, and pioneers such as Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, among others, insisted that education should be understood as a skill in developing the moral, emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of a developing child. Holistic education is based on the premise that each person finds its identity, meaning and purpose in life through connection with community, the natural world, and spiritual values such as compassion and peace.

Comenius (1592-1670) was an advocate of the outdoor world and his work took a holistic approach to learning, he believed that children learned through their senses (Joyce, 2012). Froebel's approach emphasized that children should show love and respect for nature from their early age, that by doing so technology will not spoil them (Joyce, 2012).

In psychology, Gestaltism is an example of a holistic approach. Holism in the Gestalt approach emphasizes that change in one part leads to change in the whole, and likewise – change in the whole leads to change in its parts.

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<sup>33</sup>According to the *Rule book on continuous professional development and acquisition of the title of teachers, educators and professional associates* (2012), prevention of violence, abuse and neglect, prevention of discrimination, communication skills; strengthening the professional capacities of employees, especially in the field of innovative teaching methods; as well as working with parents and students (Article 8).

### **The importance of applying the holistic approach to working with children with behavioral problems**

In order for the educational outcomes of the school to be favorable, it is necessary to create a positive climate in the class on a daily basis (Zlatković, 2014; Hunter 2008). In addition to the structural characteristics of the class (class size, student heterogeneity in the class, physical space), the positive climate in the class is also influenced by the following principles: 1. Embracing diversity; 2. Mutual relationships and appreciation; 3. Setting clear rules and expectations; 4. Setting clear goals at the beginning of each teaching unit; 5. Assertive behavior toward students (Zlatković, 2014, p.164-166).

Behind the problematic behavior of children are: the lack of attention, aggression, rejection, denial, indiscipline. Teachers are expected to reach every student. They are encouraged to use preventative strategies at the classroom level, one of them being overcorrection. It includes "identifying the context of student misbehavior, clearly specifying alternative behavior and modifying situation" (Vulfolk, Hjuž & Volkap, 2012, p.64).

The holistic approach to teaching depends not only on the instructions, but also on the sensitivity of the lecturer, the communication relations between the teacher and the student.

Children who exhibit behavioral problems lack attention, need to be animated and pointed out to the importance of analyzing a teaching unit, invited to actively participate.

Interactive teaching units, division of responsibilities regarding preparation, as well as grouping and planning extracurricular activities are guidelines that contribute to developing each child's skills. The reinforcement program based on Skinner's (Skinner 1904-1990) learning (a key concept of behaviorism) is a primary process that shapes and controls behavior, and takes place in both positive and negative ways. Positive reinforcement is the reinforcement of behavior by a positive stimulus (praise after the behavior), while negative reinforcement is the reinforcement of behavior by eliminating or avoiding some aversive events.

The art of holistic education lies in its response to different styles and needs. By respecting differences and refusing to label children, holistic teachers discover each child's particularity (Miller, 2005).

During the class, the teaching content is very important, it includes everything that the teacher and the students deal with, so even deviation from the teaching topic due to the need to discuss student difficulties or solve disciplinary problems falls within the class content (Meyer, 2002).

Cognitive-behavioral approach, behavioral analysis similar to self-assessment, is very important. It is necessary for the teacher to implement different programs of learning social competencies, e.g. programs that include a range of skills, knowledge, role-playing: anger management exercises, self-perception and self-assessment exercises, self-verbalisation, conflict resolution, mediation, assertiveness instead of aggression, and the like.

Pestalozzi (1746-1827) believed that children's learning should be in line with nature (Joyce, 2012). He also advocated an atmosphere of love, acceptance and appreciation of the child's needs, abilities and interests as a basis for developing a healthy and accomplished personality. Pestalozzi starts from the understanding that the basic goal of education should be to develop all the strengths and abilities of a person, thus contributing to the moral realization of the person itself.

Apart from working with students, one of the important factors is cooperation with parents.<sup>34</sup>

Parent-teacher monitoring is more intense once the child's problematic behavior is noted. Only by reciprocal action can a positive result be achieved.

Vrkić, Dimić and Vidić (2015, p.112) emphasize the importance of applying the holistic approach through correlation with other subjects. Teamwork is one of the most significant forms of teaching. Through teamwork, the child learns to be a part of the group, express his / her opinion, participate, exchange ideas and creativity, develop communication skills.

## Conclusions

Good practice examples show that each child's free time should be structured and organized in a quality manner. Teachers need to develop a positive relationship with students and parents. A positive relationship and cooperation also depend on mutual relationships at school. It is necessary to build trust, understanding and appreciation of every person. Trust helps the student seek help and communicate openly. Otherwise, if there is misunderstanding and poor quality of the teacher-student relationship, the attitude towards the teacher, school achievements, regularity of attendance, behavior, etc. can be adversely affected. Continuous school development is needed in order to prepare new generations for the uncertainty of the postmodern age, to prepare teachers to be willing to accept risks, deal with unpredictable situations, and be ready for possible changes (Stoll & Fink, 2000).

The holistic approach opens many topics for contemplation, inviting us to have a transformative dialogue and solve problems through an alternative approach. It is important to be willing to apply innovative ideas and to fulfill the technical requirements in schools for this type of teaching. Behavior problems in students have different forms, each person manifests them differently, it is important for the teacher to support, empathize and be in constant touch with children and parents. Cooperation with the professional service and the local community, as well as information on support and re-socialization programs available for children with behavioral problems, are of great importance.

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<sup>34</sup> According to the *Law on Foundations of Educational System*, a parent council is formed in our schools, consisting of one parent of a student from each class (Article 58.). The Parent Council has its representatives within the teaching staff when it comes to development planning, and parents can be involved in the work of teams that are formed to accomplish a specific task, program or project (Article 66).

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